

Probabilistic constraints on linguistic choice-making: the dative alternation in varieties of English

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The present study explores variability in the hidden probabilistic constraints that fuel the variation between the double object (*I give him a book*) and prepositional dative construction (*I give a book to him*) (the well-known “dative alternation”). Situated at the crossroads of the probabilistic grammar framework (which assumes that variation in language is probabilistic rather than categorical, see Bod et al. 2003) and the “English World-Wide Paradigm” (which is concerned with the sociolinguistics of, and linguistic variation across, post-colonial English-speaking communities around the world. e.g. Schneider 2007), the present study investigates the extent to which language users’ grammatical knowledge differs across dialects and varieties of English. Specifically, the study is interested in the extent to which core predictors of the dative alternation (e.g. length) are stable across regional varieties, registers, and dative verbs.

Previous studies have posited that varieties of English share a stable set of predictor variables due to the fact that all of the factors can be related to cognitive processing efforts (see, e.g., Bernaisch et al. 2014). Other studies (e.g. Bresnan & Hay 2008) report significant cross-varietal differences (e.g. animacy in New Zealand and US English). Despite those apparent disparities in their findings, the existing body of research fundamentally agrees that processing-related factors apply universally to all varieties. However, most of these studies focus on the prototypical dative verb GIVE for their analysis, and employ a limited set of registers (e.g. newspaper or spoken data). The current study is thus the first of its kind that analyses the dative alternation across different genres, modes and varieties, taking a wide amount of alternating verbs into account.

By tapping into six different varieties of Englishes, namely British English, Canadian English, New Zealand English, Singaporean English, Indian and Philippines English, thereby including spoken as well as written mode, a total of 15 different genres and a wide range of alternating verbs, this study’s comprehensiveness fills a gap in the literature.

The main linguistic constraints tested in contemporary studies were operationalized and the complete dataset of 6’034 instances of double object and prepositional dative constructions accordingly annotated. The study relies on mixed-effect logistic regression analysis to infer linguistic knowledge from observations in naturalistic corpus data. The resulting models show, that on the one hand, the six varieties under scrutiny share a core set of probabilistic constraints on their linguistic choice-making; on the other hand, cross-varietal differences can be identified.

References

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